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THE CHURCH QUESTION IN MEXICO

By
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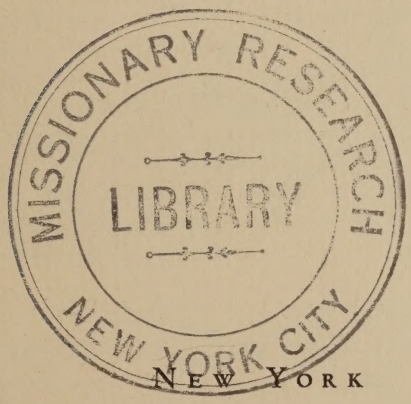
Address delivered in New York, at the invitation of Radio Station WOR, at its Forum Hour, on Sunday, May 5th, 1935.



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SELDOM has there been a more scandalous campaign carried out against a friendly nation, than that of the catholic hierarchy against Mexico.

To reach their objective, the propagandists of this campaign have systematically disregarded the historical facts at the bottom of the present conflict between Church and State in Mexico. And on the other hand, these propagandists have emphasized unfounded criminal charges in order to arouse the feelings of the American people.

The most despicable means have been employed to bring Mexico into disrepute. Sectarian sheets and a few papers have printed fantastic murder tales. Addresses are delivered in catholic circles and even the pulpit is used as a wrathful tribune to excite American catholics against Mexico.

High dignitaries of the catholic church have not hesitated in publishing books, seemingly historical, but in reality written solely to arouse American citizens against Mexico. In those books, the foremost Mexican liberal leaders—forerunners of the "Revolucionarios" of today—have been defamed and, instead, such reactionary rulers as Iturbide, Maximilian, Diaz and Huerta, are being set up on pedestals of glory in spite of the fact, registered by history, that general Huerta, for instance, perpetrated the murder of Madero, beloved Mexican leader, thinking thus to hold in check the social aims of the masses.

Scenes, filmed in the United States by paid English speaking actors, are being shown in moving pictures of the United States, as "Mexican news-reels" purported to depict the latest happenings of the alleged persecution of catholics by the Mexican government.

Therefore, it is not surprising that, being thus misinformed, American catholics should feel deeply in their hearts a legitimate indignation against their neighboring country and its government.

This is no place to expose the audacity and the aims of such propaganda. I fully realize that my words can reach today the homes of American catholics for whom I hold, as an open minded citizen, a very deep respect. I must, however, take advantage of this opportunity to expound to you some concrete data which I hope will help anyone to obtain a better understanding of the Mexican situation.

The legal provisions to which the catholic hierarchy protests, and which have caused the latest episode of this long-aged issue, are the following: First, the articles of the Constitution of 1917 referring to worship regulation. Second, the amendment to article 3 of the Constitution, relating to socialistic education implanted in Mexico.

The articles of the Constitution to which I have just referred, establish that:

Primary instruction shall be secular and no religious corporation shall direct primary schools. Churches, rectories, seminaries, monasteries, convents and all buildings designed to teach a religious creed are the property of the nation. Moreover, state legislatures have the right to determine the number of ministers of each creed according to the needs of the locality. Ministers of any religion are not entitled to vote, nor to hold public office, nor may assemble for political purposes. They shall not, in public or private meetings, in acts of worship or religious propaganda, criticize the nation's fundamental laws, the authorities, or the government. Publications of religious character must not comment on political matters. Political assemblies in churches are forbidden.

On the other hand, the provisions of the amendment to article 3 of the Constitution, read as follows:

1. Education shall be provided by the state.

2. Education shall be socialistic, divorced from all religious doctrines; and shall combat fanaticism and prejudice in such a way that school activities will create in Mexican youth a rational concept of the world and social life.

3. Only federal, state, and municipal authorities shall have the right to give primary, secondary, or normal school education.

4. Religious groups or ministers will be forbidden to interfere directly with primary, secondary, or normal school education.

5. The formulation of educational programs shall be entirely under state control.

6. No private school may function without state authority.

7. Primary education for children shall be compulsory and provided free by the state.

The above provisions are the only legal bases on which the catholic church can rightly stand to accuse the Mexican government of persecuting religion. But I ask you: Is there sufficient cause in those provisions to justify such accusation? Does non-religious teaching necessarily imply anti-religious education? Would you say that religion is a synonym of fanaticism and prejudice? When misinformed catholics protest against Mexican policies, without having read the laws which I have quoted, they answer in the affirmative unknowingly and sustain that the words fanaticism and religion are but one identical thing.

In a country like the United States, in which all churches fulfill their spiritual mission without opposing the political evolution of the country, and favor it, on the contrary, by the teachings of the highest Christian ideals, the drastic policy of the Mexican government seems naturally out of place and unjustified. In a country like Mexico, which, since its independence up to the present time, has had to conquer catholic resistance at every move toward social progress, these war-like measures do not seem arbitrary, but historically justified.

Hidalgo, the Mexican George Washington, was excommunicated by the Mexican catholic hierarchy. The 1857 constitution which instituted religious liberty for the first time in Mexico, was bitterly condemned by a papal mandate. And the third nation-wide movement which felled Díaz reactionary dictatorship and enacted the constitution of 1917 now in force, was also and is still now attacked by that same church.

Excesses might have been committed by both sides. But modern history shows that the first attacks came from the catholic hierarchy against the 1910 Mexican Revolution, and not from the latter against the former.

It has been said that it is not the law, but its application which implies an attack on religious freedom. The truth is that none of the acts of the Mexican government permit fair-minded observers to accuse the government of any persecution, either in the savage manner alleged by unsound sectarian propagandists or in any other way.

The majority of federal employes in Mexico profess the catholic religion. The government knows it! Only three months ago, an official census was taken and among other questions put to the government em-

ployes was, of course, that relating to their religious affiliations. In fact, I am quite sure that over one half of them answered that they were members of the catholic church. Not a single one, out of the fifty thousand federal employes, was discharged by the present administration on account of their belonging to the catholic or any other church. Only a handfull of "Knights of Columbus" were dismissed, not because of religion, but on account of their affiliation to a sectarian society which is openly boasting of its work to overthrow the present Mexican administration. What are half a dozen instances of dismissals among the fifty thousand remaining employes?

Does the American public know, by the way, that the resolution of congress which caused the dismissal of this hand-full of "Knights of Columbus" applied equally to all members of sectarian or political associations planning the overthrow of the government, as for instance the communist party?

Another point which has been emphasized by catholic propagandists, is the so-called anti-religious parade held in October, 1934, and which all government employes were compelled to attend. Such anti-religious government parade has never taken place in Mexico. The National Revolutionary Party organized that public manifestation. The government felt it was its duty and that of all public employes, to show their solidarity to the political party which is the national backbone of modern Mexico. Attendance to that street manifestation was considered merely as an act of collective discipline, which the government deemed at the time necessary. However, the parade, attended by nearly two hundred thousand people, was never announced as an anti-religious demonstration; and there are no grounds whatsoever allowing any one to give it an anti-religious interpretation. It had nothing to do with religion.

It has also been maliciously stressed that public school teachers are forced to sign an atheistic oath before taking up their duties and that children in schools are being forced into atheism by their teachers.

The Mexican embassy in Washington recently denied this misleading news. It gave out to the press on February 28, 1935, a clear statement denying that the government of Mexico has ever authorized any federal board of education or any single one of its teachers, throughout the Republic, to compel anybody, either teacher or pupil, to sign the apocryphal pledge which appeared in American newspapers and is still used by unscrupulous propagandists. If such atheistic oath is not required from the teachers—and the Mexican teachers themselves can be witnesses to the fact—how does any one dare to say, without any sufficient evidence, that the government of Mexico is forcing atheism into the Schools?

Speaking a few days ago to all press correspondents in the city of Mexico, President Cárdenas said the following words: "The Mexican Revolutionary Government does not try, nor does it desire to attack the religious conscience of Mexico." He added: "The excesses that have occurred are evils inherent to all political activities. But they can and will be remedied."

There is, however, one evil which is hard to remedy, for it will require many years of difficult work to correct. I mean the evil that the catholic campaign is, consciously or unconsciously, causing, when it works so intensely to divide and even place against each other two great nations which Nature made neighbors and which common sense, if nothing else, should keep as friends.